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ABSTRACT

Field experience courses permit undergraduate students to earn academic credit for work off-campus. These practicum opportunities have been rated positively by participants and alumni of psychology programs. Reactions to field experience are typically assessed following the practicum or in follow-up surveys of alumni. This study reports on an assessment of undergraduate psychology students (N=45) who participated in a variety of human service settings during their field experiences. Each subject was required to complete the Adjective Generation Technique (AGT), a longitudinal assessment of self-description, during the field placement. The AGT permits daily evaluation of a person's changes in favorability of self-concept and anxiety level. Results showed fluctuations in anxiety and favorability ratings among participants which were related to events at work. Positive events during field experiences were grouped into three categories: (1) quality of interactions with clients; (2) student participation in caregiving activities; and (3) feeling part of the team. Two dominant areas promoted increased anxiety in students: unexpected behavior from clients; and worry about making errors/mistakes. (Contains 18 references.) (Author/LL)

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ED 372 059

Assessing Student Progress in Field Experience:

Factors Influencing Positive Outcomes

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Abstract

Field experience courses permit undergraduate students to earn academic credit for work off-campus. These practicum opportunities have been rated positively by participants and alumni of psychology programs. Reactions to field experience are typically assessed following the practicum or in follow-up surveys of alumni. This study reports on an assessment of undergraduate psychology students who participated in field experience. A longitudinal assessment of self-description was completed during the time of participation. Results showed fluctuations in anxiety and favorability ratings among participants which were related to events at work.

Assessing Student Progress in Field Experience: Factors Influencing Positive Outcomes

In the past twenty year a significant development in the undergraduate psychology curriculum has been the institution of field experience courses at many colleges and universities. Vande Creek and Fleischer (1984) found that two thirds of the 291 psychology departments they surveyed offered field experience opportunities with eighty percent of these courses introduced since 1969. The field experience course permits the student to volunteer in community agencies as a method to earn academic credit. Prior to the introduction of field experience, psychology departments followed a curriculum primarily designed to prepare students to enter graduate training (Thomas, 1975). Following demand from students for relevant work experiences during their undergraduate education, the field experience courses began to appear in the curriculum (Boltuck, Peterson, & Murphy, 1980).

Institutions have continued to implement field experience courses in response to student and alumni recommendations (Finney, Snell, & Selby, 1989). Keyes and Hogberg (1990) found practicum to be among the five most useful courses ranked by psychology alumni. Practical experiences have also been found to be evaluated positively by students when integrated in both developmental (McCluskey-Fawcett & Green, 1992) and abnormal psychology courses (Scogin & Rickard, 1987).

Once available to students, this option has been found to provide students with a variety of positive benefits including: increased acceptance to graduate school (Lunneberg & Wilson, 1982), clarification of career goals (Prerost, 1981a), a job satisfaction (Sherman, 1982), and increasing a sense of purpose to study psychology (Hess, Harrison, Fink, Lilliston, Aponte & Korn, 1978). The settings for field experience can vary widely for participating students with placements ranging from traditional human service agencies to nursing homes (Jessen, 1988). Some placements can lead to less than satisfactory experiences because of specific characteristics of the worksite (Prerost, 1981b). Students prefer practicum locations that provide them with structured and well-organized training programs (Morris & Haas, 1984).

Numerous articles describing the various aspects of implementing and administering such courses have been published (e.g., Cole, 1977, Vande Creek & Fleischer, 1984, Haemmerle & Matthews, 1988). But less attention has been given to the students during participation in field experience. This study examined a group of undergraduate psychology students in a longitudinal fashion in an attempt to identify possible changes in self-descriptions and what experiences promoted positive descriptions. The identification of beneficial experiences for students during field experiences can assist the faculty coordinator in developing worthwhile placements for students.

Method

Subjects

The participants were 45 undergraduate psychology majors (31 females, 14 males) who worked at a variety of human service settings during their field experience. The participants ranged in age from 20-25 at the time of their field experience. The students worked in one setting for the length of a semester working 9 hours per week.

Procedure

Each participant was required to complete a longitudinal assessment during the field experience. The Adjective Generation Technique (AGT) was completed during the semester. The AGT was developed by Allen and Potkay (1977) to provide a longitudinal assessment of self-description. The AGT permits daily evaluation of a person's changes in favorability of self-concept and anxiety level. With the AGT the person spontaneously generates adjectives that best describe personal feelings for that day and lists major events positive and negative for the day. A set of comprehensive norms for each adjective allows for numerical Favorability and Anxiety scores to be derived. A mean of the generated adjectives then may be computed to provide a quantitative index representing the person's favorability or anxiety of self-description at a given time. Potkay, Allen, & Haapaja (1978) found the AGT useful in evaluating improvements during psychotherapy.

Results

Utilizing the AGT scores generated by field experience participants, fluctuations in favorability and anxiety were identified during the students' work activities. These fluctuations were matched to the significant daily events listed by the students. The participants consistently listed field experience events as significant daily events. Results showed that positive events during their field experiences (i.e., increases in their Favorability self-descriptions) could be grouped into three categories: 1) quality of interactions with clients; 2) student participation in caregiving activities; and 3) feeling part of the team. The first category included such events as the client showing some improvement or reacting positively to the student. The second category of caregiving activities included the tasks given the students. Feeling part of the team referred to the acceptance felt by the student from regular staff members. This latter category produced the most significant increases in Favorability scores.

Concerning the moments that increased anxiety in students, two areas appeared dominant: 1) unexpected behavior from clients, and 2) worry about making errors/mistakes. This latter area of concern produced few fluctuations in Anxiety self-description in the later stages of the field experiences as the Favorability ratings became dominant.

Students showing the highest Favorability scores at the end of their field experience, expressed significantly more positive evaluations for their placement

than students with limited favorability changes. This was assessed through a student evaluation of field experience at the conclusion of work.

Discussion

The identification of good moments during field experience can enable the faculty coordinator to develop meaningful placements for undergraduate students. The importance of matching students with placement may be needed in order to assure maximum benefit for student participants. Details of the types of the positive events reported by students and their respective AGT profiles will be provided during the presentation of this paper.

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